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Barbara McDonald

USDA Forest Service, USA

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Spirituality and Social Action: An Exploration of Committed Environmental Activists

Barbara McDonald
USDA Forest Service, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the spirituality of committed environmental activists. Eight descriptors of spirituality are offered, and spirituality's relationship to adult learning is explored.

Introduction

One type of social action that has not received much attention in adult education is environmental social action. Inglis (1991), recognizing this deficit, stated: "If in adult education, we take on board issue of praxis, transformation, and empowerment, if we accept Freire's call to dialogical revolutionary action, then not only should adult educators begin to articulate their views and theories about the environment, but they should also start to work on how the existing relationship should be changed" (p. 172). Mische (1992) noted that we cannot simply take environmental knowledge and apply it to our existing relationship with the earth: "If we are to find long-lasting solutions to environmental crises we need to get at the unconscious thought-structures, ideologies, and world views which guide our harmful choices and behavior and learn to re-inhabit the earth..." (p. 10). If adult educators and learners are to become engaged in environmental social action, we must examine the existing relationship between humans and the earth, and attempt to understand how dominant and radical ideologies affect those relationships and resulting behaviors. The purpose of this research is to explore the ideology of committed environmental activists as it is manifested as spirituality.

Method

I explored spirituality because it is one of the most enduring connections between people and the natural world. Spirit is about breaking down barriers between self and other (Kovel, 1991), and it is by denotation the breath of life that is shared by all living things. Kovel (1991) defined spirituality as the "ways people seek to realize spirit and soul in their lives" (p. 2), indicating that spirituality is a way of living that focuses on the elimination of barriers between self and other. I explored spirituality as the outward manifestation of inward ideologies regarding human/earth relationships, and their reconstruction through environmental social activism.

Ecology is the study of relationships between organisms and their living and non-living environment, and was employed as the theoretical framework for this study. Using purposeful and snowball sampling, I interviewed 18 individuals who are committed to environmental social action. Eight are environmental volunteers, and the others are employed in the environmental field. None had plans to cease their environmental work. Open coding was used to identify themes that describe these activists' spirituality. These themes are general descriptors that

characterize the activists' world view and ideology in regard to the natural environment and our human relationship with the natural world.

Preliminary Findings

All of the participants said that their environmental commitment is a result of a recursive learning about self and the natural environment. All had engaged in formal or nonformal training regarding environmental issues or topics. Seven have a defined religious practice. Two engage in other ritualistic spiritual practices. The remaining participants do not engage in any regular or defined spiritual or religious practice. Ten are agnostic and none are atheist. Eight themes emerged that are descriptive of these activists' spirituality, or the way they broke down the barriers between self and the natural world. These eight themes are: 1) Connectivity to the natural environment, to others, to God, to everything; 2) Tolerance of other spiritual and religious beliefs; 3) Creativity: They create products, ideas, and programs that help to protect and sustain the natural environment; 4) Care for the earth, for other humans, and for non-human animals; 5) Hopefulness but not optimism about our environmental future; 6) Guided by the ethic that it is wrong to degrade the natural world; 7) A feeling of compulsion to work on behalf of the natural environment; and 8) Informed by a source of wisdom and guidance outside of themselves.

Discussion

These themes are similar to other descriptions of spirituality found in adult education literature. For example, Tisdell (2000) recently described the spirituality of women social activists as interconnected, as being influenced by a higher power or universal life force, and as being related to "a strong sense of mission" (p. 328). Dirkx (1997) also emphasized this sense of connectivity and the breaking down of barriers between self and other. He as well intimated creativity in soul-based learning when he identified the imagistic and symbolic dimensions of such learning. Glazer's (1999) discussion of sacredness in adult learning referred to tolerance, as he suggested that education be rooted "in the practices of openness..." (p. 11). Palmer (1999) recognized the sacredness of the natural world when he acknowledged that it is possible to approach "the voiceless things of the world" with simple respect (p. 21). Although adult education has explored neither spirituality nor environmental social action in any depth, there is evidence to recommend that both become more prominent in adult education research.

Hopefully, this research has helped to demystify spirituality by defining it as a way that people find meaningful connections between self and other. Spirituality is an outward manifestation of worldview and ideology. This research raises a number of questions, such as: 1) What is the relationship of spirituality to adult learning? 2) What kinds of learning inform or enhance spirituality? 3) Is environmental spirituality characteristically different than spiritualities informed by other social issues? Environmental social action and its manifested spirituality has a potential to enhance our understanding of social action, spirituality, and their relationship to adult learning. This research is a call to turn our attention in their direction.

References

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